The Last Days of Squatter Sovereignty

By ELEANOR BOOTH SIMMONS.

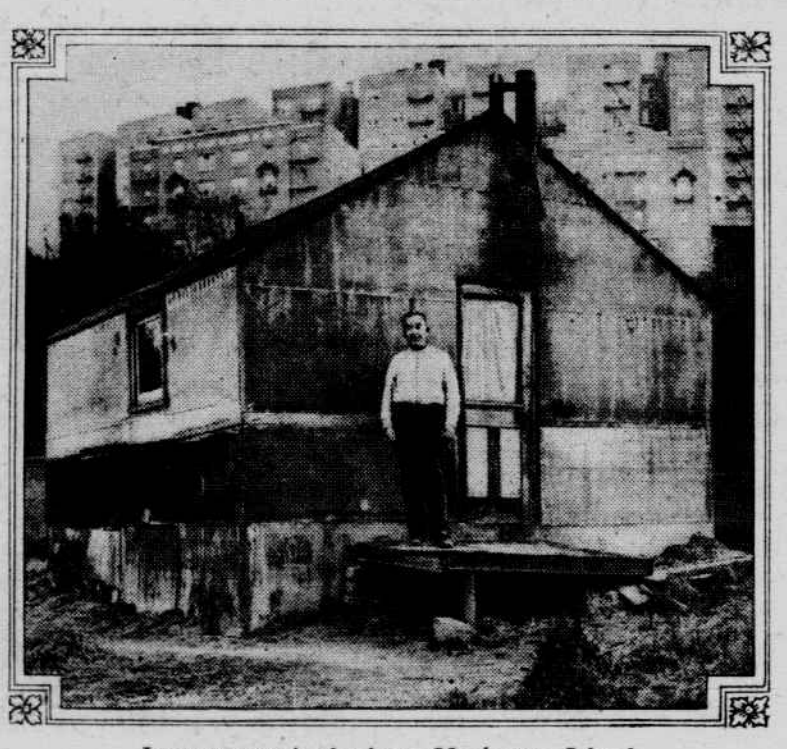
OLD MARTIN MONTROSE MOLENAOR is dead.

Now there were really two Martin Montrose Molenaors, the one inside the other. The one who was visible to the eye was very poor, very old, very shabby, dragging out the last of his 84 years in a precarious shelter, just a small square tent that he had pitched in an open lot at Broadway and Nagle avenue, a few blocks below Dyckman street, and boarded up and tarred over in a rough attempt to keep out the weather. A smoky kerosene lamp lighted him to the army cot on which he slept, and for the very water he used he depended on the kindness of neighbors who let him draw a pailful or two each day at their tap.

But the inside Martin Montrose Molenaor was young, since hope and confidence are always young. This Martin, looking up from the door of his shack at the cliffs of Washington Heights to the west of him, crowned with the splendid C. K. G. Billings estate and the gray towers of Libby Castle, or glancing from his slit of a window at the wooded slope of Fort George to the east, said daily:

"All that—and that—is mine. Some day the courts will decide that it is mine, and I shall be one of the richest men in America, richer than John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who fancies that he owns that Washington Heights property."

Death came and plucked the dreamer away from his ambitions, away from the law books and papers with which he fed his hopes, but his spirit abides in his son, Wilfred Molenaor, a sturdy ex-cowpuncher who left the Colorado plains for New York to carry on the hereditary Molenaor fight; and in his daughter, Mrs. Evelyn Holston. These two live on in the shack, consoling themselves with their great expectations for the discomfort they endure in holding down their claim. They hold that the field around them is part of the Molenaor property under a will drawn by their great-grandfather, a will disposing of many thousands of acres, and all the attempts of the man who says he bought the field to shake them from the face of it have so far failed. The shack sticks.



Last squatter's shack on Manhattan Island.

Property was made to be struggled over, of course. The romance and the tragedy of such disputes have made many a plot for the novelists. But some of the best plots go a-begging for a writer, and if Washington Heights only had its Charles Dickens to take the Molenaor case and make of it what the Englishman made of "Bleak House" we might have a great American novel. Even the plain facts of the tale, plainly told, are romantic. The Molenaors, Wilfred and Evelyn, middle-aged brother and sister, are not romantic figures, but that wouldn't matter to Balzac, say. What a pity we haven't an American Balzac to immortalize them!

Back in 1812, when the first Martin Molenaor made his will, that will which was valid enough to have engaged the attention of the United States Supreme Court more than once since then, he bequeathed his holdings to his wife, his daughter Catherine, and his three sons, David William, William, and Dewitt Clinton Molenaor. A thrifty soul was old Martin, though unlettered, as men were like to be in those days. Vast possessions in land were his. He owned the wooded heights on which now stand Libby Castle, in whose Norman halls Father Finn and his Paulist choristers live and study their music, and the Billings estate recently purchased by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. He owned the western side of Fort George Hill. He owned a Z-shaped stretch of ground which, beginning on Morningside Heights, takes in a bit of what is now the campus of Columbia University and a slice of what is now Morningside Park. Even further down toward the growing city he possessed oddments of real estate; indeed, could he have known how valuable his possessions would presently become, surely he would have taken more plans to make a binding will—and he'd have brought up his sons in less spendthrift fashion.

Great-grandfather Molenaor's last will and testament is a quaint, misspelled document, very faulty in construction. One may fancy the old chap sitting down to write it, conscientiously and with painful care dividing the accumulations of a lifetime among the children who were so soon to make ducks and drakes of it all. Those were slave times and one of the clauses of the will runs thus:

"To my beloved wife Mercey I bequeath

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